

POINTS OF PAIN

Mykola Ridnyi

The social and political context in Ukraine has changed significantly over the past few years. While the symptoms of repressive actions by the authorities and the move towards a totalitarian state are not evolving as rapidly here as in Belarus and Russia, there are still plenty of reasons to worry. In order to strengthen their conservatism, the authorities have established a “National Commission on Public Morality” and increased the influence of the Orthodox Church in society, all the while the largest nationalist party, supported and controlled by the radical right, won seats in parliament. These social and political trends are directly connected with the artistic and activist milieus, forming a network of so-called “points of pain” and conflicts with the authorities and the orthodox and far-right activists.

In 2003, the “National Expert Commission for Protecting Public Morality”¹ was established, which began to be extremely active in 2008, when it was run by Vasyl Kostitsky. Incidentally, the decision to establish this commission was taken by the cabinet ministers of Yulia Tymoshenko, who, due to changing political winds, often appears in the media as a victim of the new regime. Under new laws, the violations of public morals can place the offender in civil, administrative, and even criminal liability. One of the initiatives of the commission was to subject all websites to state-registration. Therefore, even Internet content is closely scrutinized by the officials.

Anatoly Ulyanov, the editor of the contemporary art news portal proza.com.ua, actively opposed the Commission and spoke publicly against it. This seriously aggravated not only the official representatives but also the sympathizers of the political institutions that protect religious radicals in “The Brotherhood” (Bratstvo) party. On March 13th 2009, Ulyanov was attacked by one of the party’s activists.² Soon afterwards, the Commission closed the proza.com.ua portal and Ulyanov decided to emigrate. On November 2nd 2009, the activist and blogger Olexandr Volodarsky accused the Commission of censorship and exposed their efforts to restrict freedom of expression.³ He made a performance in front of the parliament during which he and his partner simulated sexual intercourse, while a third participant gave a speech about the relativity of moral standards and the impossibility of a direct interpretation of the concept of morality. After the end

of the performance, Volodarsky was arrested and charged with “hooliganism by a group of people.” Although Volodarsky’s action was supported by numerous activists and the media, he was convicted on September 9th 2010 and sent to a colony in the Kotsybinske settlement in the Kyiv region for more than a year.⁴ Similar cases of censorship and repression have not always been the Commission’s doing, but they have been perpetrated by like-minded cultural representatives.

For example, in May 2009, the director of the Kharkov Art Museum, Valentyna Myzgina, decided to close “The New History”⁵, an exhibition curated by the SOSka group. The project was conceived as an intervention of contemporary art in the traditional museum exhibition space, with the goal of creating a dialogue between different artistic traditions, while avoiding casting classical art against contemporary art. Myzgina’s decision was not based on any order “from the top,” but rather represented a local act of censorship in the context of the national “moral” environment. In response, the artistic community expressed overwhelming support for the project, which was documented in the catalogue of the exhibition.

The biggest scandal was the closure of the exhibition “Ukrainian Body”⁶ at the Visual Culture Research Center (VCRC) in February 2012. The exhibition offered a view of Ukrainian society as a material, cultural, ideological, and aesthetic environment through the corporal experiences of the human bodies forming this society. Serhiy Kvit, the director of the Kiev-Mohyla Academy, where the VCRC was located, decided to close off the exhibition to visitors three days after it opened, explaining his decision with the remark “It’s not an exhibition, it’s shit.” The subsequent waves of protests and media coverage to the odious gesture worsened the conflict; in the end, the artists and activists were expelled from the Academy’s premises and the VCRC was closed. The context behind this case is that right-wing political views are very popular at these types of institutions. Even some of the professors share these political positions, especially the director Kvit, who is an active supporter of the nationalist party “Freedom” (Svoboda).⁷ As a leftist organization inside this Academy, the VCRC was constantly under attack.

Nevertheless, after this conflict, the VCRC activists managed to re-open the center in a new space – the cinema “Zhovten.” But right-wing activists also attacked the first exhibition in this space, “A room of my own,” which was organized by Evgenia Belorusetz and presented research on Ukrainian queer families. As a result of the attack, the majority of the artists’ photographs were destroyed; the guard was also physically assaulted.⁸

A few months after this, representatives of the LGBT community declared they would cancel the Gay-Pride parade in Kiev, fearing violence and harassment from the extreme-right. Despite this, two leaders of the initiative “Ukrainian Gay Forum,” Svyatoslav Sheremet and Maksym Kayanchuk, were severely assaulted by a dozen attackers.⁹ On the same day, there was a counter-action in support of



traditional family values in the city. Moreover, members of the leftist movement, such as Serhiy Kutniy from the Left Feminist Initiative and Andriy Movchan¹⁰ from the Student Union "Direct Action," were also attacked. Incidentally, one of these assaults took place on the anniversary of Hitler's birthday, April 20th 2012.

During the 2012 parliamentary elections in Ukraine, the "Freedom" party won about 12% of the votes. Under the guise of "official" political lobbying, these nationalists are actually legitimated to continue in their violence, homophobia and outright fascism. A good example of this was the action in defense of human rights, which took place in Kiev on December 12th 2012,¹¹ where "Freedom"

party activists organized a provocation. As a result, the police detained several participants in the action for human rights whereas the party activists were released. Given the authorities' aforementioned conservative-repressive stance, the actions of the nationalists, who position themselves as "the opposition," are in fact collaborationist. Thus, right-wing radicals actually save time for militia, which by now doesn't intervene in conflict situations with dissenters. Currently, the right wing nationalist niche appears more and more comfortable and prominent in the context of increasing repression and control by the authorities, especially given the alliance of Church and State in the reactionary struggle for "true" values, which we are all expected to follow vigilantly.

1 More information about the National Expert Commission for Protecting Public Morality (in Ukrainian): <http://www.moral.gov.ua>

2 Art-critic Anatoly Ulyanov and the Bratstvo fighters, 2009, published in "Forbidden Art" (in Russian): http://artprotest.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1178&catid=13&ordering=2

3 More information on the Volodarsky affair on his personal blog: <http://free.shitman.net>

4 "Olexandr Volodarsky sent to a penal colony," 2011, published on "Openspace.ru": <http://os.colta.ru/news/details/20807/?attempt=1>

5 See "Instead of an Excursion," video by SOSka Group, 2010: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wI4LpmvIGp0>

6 See "Statement of the Visual Culture Research Center, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (Kyiv, Ukraine)" published in ArtLeaks: <http://art-leaks.org/2012/02/11/statement-of-the-visual-culture-research-center-national-university-of-kyiv-mohyla-academy-kyiv-ukraine>

7 More information about Svaboda (in Ukrainian): <http://www.svoboda.org.ua/>

8 Anna Tsyba, "The attack on Evgenia Belorusets' exhibition 'A room of my own' or homophobia without limits," 2012, published in ART Ukraine (in Russian): <http://www.artukraine.com.ua/articles/949.html>

9 Alexandra Lopata, "A peaceful LGBT march in Kiev was disrupted and the organizers were severely beaten," 2012, published in Kiev Pride 2012 (in Ukrainian): http://lgbtua.com/pride/news/news_111.html

10 In the center of Kiev, a journalist was beaten by six assailants, 2012, published in Censor.Net.Ua (in Russian): http://censor.net.ua/photo_news/203839/v_tsentre_kieva_shestero_neizvestnyh_izbili_jurnalista_fotoreportaj

11 Activists protesting the law banning "homosexual propaganda" were arrested in Kiev, 2012, published in Ukrainskaya Pravda (in Russian): <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rusnews/2012/12/8/6979030>

Mykola Ridnyi is an artist and curator based in Kharkov, Ukraine. He took part in Boris Mikhailov's workshops (2005) and graduated from the Sculpture Department of the Kharkov State Academy of Design and Arts (2008). He is the founder and curator of the gallery-laboratory SOSka in Kharkov since 2005. He curated the projects: "Numbers (SOSka group and Program Class), Center of Actual Art Eidos, Kiev, Ukraine in 2009; "Generation" (Program of workshops by R.E.P. group, SOSka group, David Ter-Oganyan and Aleksandra Galkina), City Art Gallery, Kharkov, Ukraine in 2008. Ridnyi's work has been exhibited in Europe, Russia and the US.